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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses the highlights of a study which surveyed (in 1988) the book-length works taught in high school English programs in public, parochial, and independent schools and then compared the survey results with results of a similar survey in 1963. The digest reports that the 10 titles most frequently taught in public, Catholic, and independent schools for Grades 9-12 are remarkable for their consistency more than their differences: the titles included in the top 10 are identical in the public and Catholic school samples, and nearly so in the independent schools. Additionally, the digest reports that the lists of most frequently required texts show little recognition of the works of women or of minority authors and have changed only minimally since 1963. (SR)

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Book-Length Works Taught in High School English Courses

Arthur N. Applebee

The Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature has recently completed a study of the book-length works taught in high school English programs. The study is part of a series of related studies of content and approaches in the teaching of English that the Center will carry out over the next several years. Together, these studies will provide a comprehensive picture of what is being taught, to whom, for what reasons, and under what constraints. Such a portrait is an essential first step in any reassessment of the literature curriculum, providing a necessary reference point for any systematic attempts at reform.

To learn more about the book-length works that students are actually reading, the Literature Center conducted a national survey of book-length works currently being taught in public, parochial, and independent secondary schools. To provide some basis for understanding the results, the survey replicated a study completed 25 years earlier, in the spring of 1963 (Anderson, 1964). In both studies, department chairs were asked to list "for each grade in your school the book-length works of literature which all students in any English class study." Four different samples of schools were surveyed: 1) public schools, Grades 7-12; 2) independent schools, Grades 9-12; 3) Catholic schools, Grades 9-12; and 4) urban public schools, Grades 7-12, from communities of 100,000 or more.

Highlights

- The ten titles most frequently taught in public, Catholic, and independent schools for Grades 9-12 are remarkable for their consistency more than their differences: the titles included in the top ten are identical in the public and Catholic school samples, and nearly so in the independent schools.

Public	Catholic	Independent
Romeo and Juliet	Huckleberry Finn	Macbeth
Macbeth	The Scarlet Letter	Romeo and Juliet
Huckleberry Finn	Macbeth	Huckleberry Finn
Julius Caesar	To Kill a Mockingbird	The Scarlet Letter
To Kill a Mockingbird	The Great Gatsby	Hamlet
The Scarlet Letter	Romeo and Juliet	The Great Gatsby
Of Mice and Men	Hamlet	To Kill a Mockingbird
Hamlet	Of Mice and Men	Julius Caesar
The Great Gatsby	Julius Caesar	The Odyssey
Lord of the Flies	Lord of the Flies	Lord of the Flies

- When results are compiled by author rather than title, Shakespeare, Steinbeck, Twain, Dickens, and Miller are the five most popular authors in all three samples. Lee and Hawthorne also are included in the top ten in each list. The only major variation in the top ten concerns the place of Classical literature, which is stressed somewhat more in the Catholic schools (Sophocles ranks 7th) and the independent schools (Sophocles and Homer rank 8th and 9th, respectively).
- The lists of most frequently required texts show little recognition of the works of women or of minority authors. In all settings examined, the lists of most frequently required books and authors were dominated by white males, with little change in overall balance from similar lists 25 years ago. In the titles required in 30% or more of the public schools in 1988, Grades 7-12, for example, there were only 2 women and no minority authors.

Public Schools, Grades 7 - 12	
Romeo and Juliet	Shakespeare
Macbeth	Shakespeare
Huckleberry Finn	Twain
To Kill a Mockingbird	Lee
Julius Caesar	Shakespeare
The Pearl	Steinbeck
The Scarlet Letter	Hawthorne
Of Mice and Men	Steinbeck
Lord of the Flies	Golding
Diary of a Young Girl	Frank
Hamlet	Shakespeare
The Great Gatsby	Fitzgerald
Catholic Schools, Grades 9 - 12	
Huckleberry Finn	Twain
The Scarlet Letter	Hawthorne
Macbeth	Shakespeare
To Kill a Mockingbird	Lee
The Great Gatsby	Fitzgerald
Romeo and Juliet	Shakespeare
Hamlet	Shakespeare
Of Mice and Men	Steinbeck
Julius Caesar	Shakespeare
Lord of the Flies	Golding
A Separate Peace	Knowles
Catcher in the Rye	Salinger
Independent Schools, Grades 9 - 12	
Macbeth	Shakespeare
Romeo and Juliet	Shakespeare
Huckleberry Finn	Twain
The Scarlet Letter	Hawthorne
Hamlet	Shakespeare
The Great Gatsby	Fitzgerald
To Kill a Mockingbird	Lee

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Independent Schools, Grades 9 - 12 (continued)	
Julius Caesar	Shakespeare
The Odyssey	Homer
Lord of the Flies	Golding
Of Mice and Men	Steinbeck
Our Town	Wilder

- Changes over time in the nature of the most popular selections were minimal. Although the popularity of specific titles has shifted over time, the canon continues to be dominated by Shakespeare and other traditional authors, with some additional attention to contemporary literature and easily accessible texts (*e.g.*, adolescent or young adult novels).
- Most titles are regularly taught at several different grade levels. For example, of the 20 most frequently taught books in Grades 9 through 12 in the public school sample, all are taught in at least three grade levels, and 70% are taught in all four high school grades. Although most schools limit particular texts to a specific grade level, these results suggest that most titles can be taught successfully at a variety of levels.
- Although there is considerable diversity in the levels at which titles are taught, there is also some consistency in the grade levels at which specific titles are most likely to be taught.
- There is considerably more consensus about what the upper tracks are asked to read, both in terms of the percentage of schools citing each title and in terms of the amount of overlap among the lists. The lists for the lower tracks show less overlap with one another, as well as a somewhat greater proportion of relatively recent literature and of young adult novels.

The picture that is presented here is incomplete along a number of significant dimensions. It is important to remember that this survey, and the lists that result, only asked about book-length works, not about the many anthologized selections of short stories, poems, and essays that complement the individual book-length titles. The distribution of favorite authors, of works by women, and of minority literature might look somewhat different if the full range of selections were examined. Other studies from the Literature Center will clarify this larger picture.

The second point to remember is that the lists reflect titles required of all students in *any* class within a school, not of all students who take English. Thus the curriculum experienced by any given student is likely to look different from that implied in these lists; for most, it is likely to be considerably narrower. On the other hand, the lists do not include the books that students read independently, either for school or on their own. In that sense, the literary experience of American school children is likely to be considerably broader than these lists imply, at least for some children.

What the lists do reflect is the state of the high school canon—the titles and authors that for whatever reasons are most likely to find their way into the required curriculum. They thus reflect what schools explicitly value as the foundation of students' literary experience. With these lists in front of us, we have a more solid place to ground our current debates about what should be taught to whom, and why. Those debates will not be easily or quickly resolved. They involve fundamental questions about the nature of the literary and cultural experiences that students could share, as well as the degree of differentiation that is necessary if all students are to be able to claim a place and an identity within the works that they read. The debates also involve fundamental pedagogical questions about the most effective means to help all students develop an appreciation for and competence in the reading of literature.

With these lists before us, it is time for such debates to begin.

A full report of the study is available from the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature (Applebee, 1989) and from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills [ED 309 453]. The report includes details of sampling and analysis, full lists of all titles taught by any school in the sample, and further breakdown of results by grade level, by track, and by type of community served.

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